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Stranger in a Strange Land: A History of Transatlantic Exchange

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***Le Corbusier in America: Travels in the Land of the Timid*. By Mardges Bacon. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2001. 406 pages. $59.95 (cloth).**

The Swiss-born French architect Le Corbusier arrived in New York harbor on the luxury liner *Normandie* on October 21, 1935, on his first visit to the United States, a lecture tour organized by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). The American architectural community, then caught up in a painful transition from eclectic traditionalism to twentieth-century modernism, anticipated his arrival with a considerable range of emotions. Most architects and architecture students, as well as intellectuals and artists who observed the urban scene, were well aware of his purist design work, whatever their opinions of it. They knew his abstract "machines for living" and his plans for vast cities of widely spaced towers from museum exhibitions and from his manifesto *Vers une architecture* (1923), which gained wide attention in 1927 when translated as *Towards a New Architecture*. His oracular prose flattered Americans by suggesting that the principles of modern architecture, although stated by Le Corbusier so programmatically as to suggest commandments brought down from on high, actually owed much to the direct functional engineering of American grain elevators, bridges, and factory buildings. And now here was the author himself, come to reflect America back to itself with a European imprimatur. But the architect, unfashionably hatless, wearing odd, thick-framed glasses,

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and unable to say more in English than a few words of slang that he learned on shipboard, had an even more ambitious intention—nothing less than the reform of American society through the total rebuilding of its cities. Anticipating a celebrity's welcome, Le Corbusier looked around the deck for the press photographers he assumed would greet him. In fact there was no welcoming party. His interpreter Robert Jacobs, a young American who worked for him in Paris, hastily bribed someone to make a show of photographing the architect even though he had run out of film. Thus began a two-month visit the motives, goals, and results of which seemed quixotic even then. Even so, Mardges Bacon, a professor of art and architecture at Northeastern University, succeeds admirably in revealing the complexity of *Le Corbusier in America*.

Before one has read a word of Bacon's study, the physical and visual characteristics of the book as object suggest a work designed to express self-evident significance. Possessing the heavy paper and rugged binding typical of the MIT Press's architecture books, *Le Corbusier in America* weighs three and a quarter pounds, thereby proclaiming a need for serious reading in study or library rather than inviting casual skimming. The book's solid boards, end papers, and dust jacket, all in black, offer dramatic conceptual contrast to the image of pristine white surfaces evoked for the past eighty years by any casual mention of the architect's name. When the book is opened, its pages form a spread of four vertical columns whose horizontal sweep extends so far that a reader must slide the book back and forth, especially if a notebook is placed alongside. The physicality of this book alone demands active involvement. What most compellingly attracts the eye, however, are the illustrations, nearly two hundred of them, effectively reproduced and generously scattered through the text. Many are unfamiliar (a blessing in a field that tends to repeat iconic images) and run the gamut from informal snapshots of Corbu and his hosts to aspects of popular culture that attracted his attention, from views of the cities and structures he visited to examples of their influence in his later work, from the large impromptu pastel sketches that he created while lecturing (reproduced in color) to the playful drawings of his private notebooks. An examination of Bacon's documentation suggests exhaustive library and archival research requiring more than fifteen hundred endnotes, many of them discursive, filling seventy-six closely-printed pages. Her acknowledgements refer to interviews stretching back to 1984 with more than forty

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individuals, nearly half of them now deceased, their names comprising a select who's who of American architecture in the postwar era. When one finally begins reading, the measured prose and precise conceptual framing indicate an author carefully marshalling her research to ensure that each and every detail of a long, complicated narrative finds its rightful place. We know we are in good hands.

Even so, while reading the first few chapters, I often turned back to the dust jacket. There, in a negative reversal of white lines against a black background, appears Le Corbusier's mock-heroic sketch of himself as a pipe-smoking colossus bridging the Atlantic from America to France, firmly planting one foot in front of the Eiffel tower while flexing the other to step from Manhattan's shore. This image, sketched ten days before the architect sailed for home, radiated a familiarity the source of which eluded me. Finally I realized that despite Corbu's avant-gardism, there was something consummately bourgeois about his calm self-possession, his idealistic optimism, his Cartesian sense of clarity and rightness in the face of irrational absurdities, his enthusiasm for steamships and fast cars, his trust in public-spirited captains of industry, his love of domestic relaxation. The jaunty, confident figure of this globe-trotting self-portrait, effortlessly rendered in a few hastily inked lines, reminded me of the image and persona of Tintin, the intrepid boy-journalist, wearing an alert, open expression along with his plus fours, whose fictional comic-book adventures gained such fame among French speakers that Charles de Gaulle supposedly declared him "my only international rival."[1] The Belgian illustrator Georges Remi (known as Hergé) published the first in the long-running series of Tintin books four years before Corbu's American tour. Bacon's title *Le Corbusier in America* echoes Hergé's *Tintin en Amérique*, which appeared in book form in 1932. More to the point, the subtitle of the architect's own published memoir of his trip, *voyage au pays des timides*, paralleled the title of Hergé's first book, *Tintin au pays des Soviets*. Le Corbusier and Hergé both relied on Georges Duhamel's *Scènes de la vie future* (1930), a sensationalist American travelogue, as the source of their images of Chicago gangsters and American corruption.[2] While Hergé's gangsters, cowboys, Indians, and tycoons can be dismissed as entertaining comic-book props, one must take seriously Corbu's one-dimensional stereotypes of gangsters and cowboys, his accomplished "Amazon" women dominating "timid" suburban men, precisely because Bacon tells us that his "armature of

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preconceptions" (xiii) remained intact throughout his travels, immune to correction or alteration. Le Corbusier's experience in America left him fundamentally untouched, much as Tintin remains innocent and immaculate throughout his many global adventures. At the risk of national stereotyping, one thinks of a more recent French traveler, Jean Baudrillard, unable to perceive or penetrate everyday realities as he pursued his own projection of America as hologram.[3]

As the above reflections might suggest, Bacon presents Le Corbusier's visit within the context of an ongoing transatlantic exchange. Although the outlines of this dialogue on modernism in architecture and urban planning are well known, she provides a nuanced summary encompassing subtle details often glossed over by historians. By the mid-1930s a number of complex debates were under way among American architects and critics who were confronting various European theoretical and practical reflections of America's own technological modernity. The battle was raging at architecture schools at Columbia, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and elsewhere, with traditionalists insisting that students must work in a beaux-arts mode (ironically French-inspired) that had them drafting monumental neoclassical facades for imaginary projects, while modernists who followed Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, or Ludwig Mies van der Rohe were advocating the application of modern materials and techniques to solving problems posed by actual projects for real sites. Hardly monolithic, the modernist camp split into several factions as defined by Bacon: those who emphasized the aesthetic formalism proposed by MoMA's "Modern Architecture" exhibition in 1932; those who adopted a more technocratic approach based on an American engineering vernacular that had inspired European modernism in the first place; and those in urban planning who rejected universal rationalist assumptions as they responded to perceived social needs.

Le Corbusier arrived in the midst of a ferment for which he was himself partly responsible. Speaking at universities, museums, and art associations on the East Coast from Maine to Maryland, and in Chicago and the upper Midwest, he shifted among three basic lectures, each addressing a different scale of design. In "Theory of Pure Forms" Corbu explained the neoplatonic geometry at the core of his design work. "Great Works" praised such American structures as the George Washington Bridge before presenting the rationale for some of his own key projects. Finally, addressing the central concern of his visit, he

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described "The Radiant City," a limitlessly extendable urban belt of office towers and factory-built housing that he conceived as an antidote to the "great waste," his phrase for the decentralization of American cities through suburbanization. The ideas advanced in Corbu's lectures also reached Americans through an exhibition that he organized at MoMA, "Recent Work of Le Corbusier," which traveled during the next three years to fourteen other locations from coast to coast.

Bacon traces how Corbu's lectures—and the exhilarating, confusing, occasionally maddening presence of the architect himself—served as further catalysts for the ongoing debate about modernism. An appearance by Le Corbusier was a distinct event. On one occasion he sauntered in late, oblivious to his audience, chewing on a long loaf of French bread in a transatlantic reversal of Benjamin Franklin's famous entry into Philadelphia. The architect I. M. Pei, who was then a student, recalled Corbu as "insolent" and "abusive" when he spoke at MIT—but appropriately so because "we had to be shocked out of our complacency" (97). He always spoke rapidly in French, referring only to a few note cards, accompanied by slides, short films, recordings of Gershwin, and capsule translations by Jacobs. During each lecture the architect illustrated his points by sketching on large horizontal sheets of paper tacked around the stage. Often preserved, these drawings now facilitate Bacon's excellent reconstructions of the lectures. At Vassar College, however, the young "Amazons" rushed the stage afterwards, ripped up the sketches, and presented the fragments to the admiring architect for his autograph. In Philadelphia he ignored the outstretched hand of conservative architect Paul Cret and later occupied himself, seated between Cret and his wife at dinner, in practicing American obscenities (such as "son of a beetch" [98]). Although Le Corbusier became involved in an exchange of insulting letters with Albert Barnes, the eccentric art collector, and closed out his stay in America by bickering with MoMA over the receipts from the tour, he managed to stay on good terms with Nelson A. Rockefeller, then a wealthy young real estate developer with ties to MoMA who had just overseen the planning of Rockefeller Center. Rockefeller adopted Le Corbusier's ideology of promoting urban centralization, but he did not, as the architect had hoped, become his patron, preferring instead the pleasanter, more accommodating Wallace K. Harrison, who had worked on Rockefeller Center. To her credit, Bacon embeds her exposition of such relationships in social and cultural contexts that extend beyond the realm of the merely anecdotal.

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As already noted, Le Corbusier seems to have learned little about the United States on his travels, except during a tour of Henry Ford's River Rouge plant in Detroit that "plunged" him "into a kind of stupor" (102), as he recorded, and renewed his interest in manufactured housing. He gained the most experience through an intimate relationship with Marguerite Tjader Harris, a writer and former mistress of Theodore Dreiser, for whom he returned to New York at every spare moment. With his wife remaining in Paris, Corbu adopted Harris as his American muse. Their frequent automotive excursions as "machine age flâneurs" (37), in Bacon's witty phrase, afforded firsthand experience of New York's inner congestion and of its wasteful suburbs sprawling rapidly into rural areas, all of which reinforced his vision of the Radiant City as America's only viable future. Although Le Corbusier never tired, as Bacon observes, of regarding the skyscrapers of Manhattan "from a great distance or in an idealized view from above," where they seemed "iconic and ordered," from up close, in the streets, they conveyed "an image of disorder" (147). While unsuccessfully trying to convince American public authorities to undertake what Bacon ironically refers to as "demolition based planning" (302), which would have gutted Manhattan and replaced its congested palimpsest of structures with a geometric array of separated towers, Le Corbusier also made promotional efforts at the opposite end of the scale. He touted the concept of manufactured housing at meetings with executives of materials and manufacturing companies such as Union Carbide, American Cyanamid, American Radiator & Standard Sanitary, and General Motors. Again, however, his efforts came to nothing. Bacon suggests that while it was easy to promote ideas in general, it was impossible literally to sell them. Pondering the impact of Corbu's ideas in America, she observes that both prefabrication and widespread urban restructuring were prominently displayed at the New York World's Fair of 1939, the latter in the highly popular "Highways and Horizons" exhibit designed by Norman Bel Geddes for General Motors with its vast dioramas of a city of Corbusian towers serviced by elevated expressways.

Bacon's study is superb by any scholarly measure as a complex portrait of rapidly changing architectural theory and practice viewed through the Rorschach test of Le Corbusier's lecture tour. She presents a convincing portrait of this somewhat odd, opinionated, irritating individual and draws significance from his interactions with architects,

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educators, socialites, intellectuals, reporters, industrialists, and the few people who actually befriended him during his American visit. She also deconstructs the complex transatlantic intellectual exchanges of much of Corbu's work, from his early French villas and urban projections to his unexpectedly fruitful collaboration on the United Nations headquarters in 1947, the only architectural commission that resulted, though twelve years later, from a trip whose central motive was the gaining of commissions. All in all, *Le Corbusier in America* is a splendidly complex, satisfying work.

However, Bacon errs in representing Le Corbusier as a latter-day Tocqueville offering "some of the most penetrating observations ever written about the nature of American culture and society during the Great Depression" (88). In fact, as she admits, his preconceptions and conclusions about America often bore little resemblance to reality. While trying to account for the timidity and blandness of well-to-do Americans, for example, he maintained that "American culture was the victim of its own agent of repression," its own metaphorical "*salpêtre*" (saltpeter, an anti-aphrodisiac reputedly added to food in boarding schools and prisons). With sexual energies drained off by Broadway shopping, burlesque houses, and Harlem nightspots, it was no wonder that even Manhattan exhibited what Corbu described as a "funereal spirit" (214). All the same, he admired African American jazz because, in his words, it comprised "the melody of the soul joined with the rhythm of the machine" (225). This "synthesis of the folk and the mechanical" (221), as rephrased by Bacon, seemed to echo Corbu's own attempt to capture in machine-age architecture the spirit of the Mediterranean's sun-drenched vernacular architecture. To revive America, however, he thought it was not sufficient to create a national style out of white intellectualism and black primitivism. According to Bacon, "only an infusion of French culture, which he considered to be of a higher order, could ensure the required renewal." The outcome would depend on the actions of those members of the American "elite and intelligentsia who have recognized France as the fountainhead of art, culture, reason, and the spirit" (227–28). Although Le Corbusier himself might have declared, "I have felt myself become more and more a man of everywhere" (230), he actually moved through the American landscape as if the thick, dark-framed lenses of his trademark glasses distorted everything exactly as they had in Paris.

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To conclude, Mardges Bacon's ambitious portrait of an uneven genius confronting a strange new world can be profitably recommended on its own terms as a text essential for cultural historians of modernity and modernism. But if we step back from it for a more general view, we might also perceive an object lesson for our contemporary American civilization, whose self-image and global projections are often as complacently comfortable and as oddly surreal as those of Le Corbusier.

NOTES

1. De Gaulle in 1969 as quoted by André Malraux, according to *Le site Charles de Gaulle* (Fondation et Institut Charles de Gaulle), *http://www.charles-de-gaulle.org/degaulle/citations/citat.htm*, accessed May 27, 2002.
2. Harry Thompson, *Tintin: Hergé and His Creation* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992), 49–50.
3. Jean Baudrillard, *Amérique* (Paris: B. Grasset, 1986), trans. Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London and New York: Verso, 1988), 29–30.

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